

MRS. LATON'S TEA.

Enconced in the depths of her big arm chair, a smile lighting up her fine old face that her white hair framed with a crown of snow, Mrs. Harmon was considering her nephew Andrew, a good-looking young fellow of twenty-eight, who, for his part, was considering the fireplace on the mantel, whose hands were already well past 3 o'clock.

"Well, Andrew, do you find my clock very interesting?"

In some confusion the young man stammered an excuse, but she went on:

"Now don't deny it, you naughty fellow. You wanted to know if your visit had lasted long enough for you to take your departure decently."

"Not at all, aunt. Your guests are quite wrong, for I haven't the slightest intention of going yet. But why do you keep a regular sun dial like that in your drawing-room?"

"Perhaps because I was born so long ago, that I am not the clock that is behind time. But come instead of criticizing my drawing-room, tell me what you are going to do when you leave here."

"In the first place I am not going to leave here for some time, but when I have wearied you of my presence until you cannot stand it any longer, it will be time for me to go to Mrs. Laton's tea."

"Mrs. Laton—Pauline Laton?"

"The same."

"Ah, yes, I used to see her some time ago. I remember her vaguely—a large woman, dark."

"She is a blonde, aunt."

"Indeed? She used to be a brunette. And so you are sighing at the feet of Mrs. Laton?"

"She must enjoy it."

"Well, I rather think she does."

"Is it fun?"

Yes, after a fashion. We are always the same little circle of friends, and then, besides Mrs. Laton, there's a sister, a rather good-looking girl and a few other young matrons and bachelor girls."

And what do you do besides look at these women?"

We take tea, which we moderate with rum and a bit of lemon; we gossip and we flirt."

"But, oh, my dear aunt, we must do something between 5 o'clock and dinner."

"Evidently, and flirting is what you have found to do."

"It is a way to kill time."

"I scarcely know just what you meant by the term. Explain it to me."

"Oh, impossible! A definition for the word has long been sought, but it has not yet been found. But, given a young woman teatete with a young man who is not a fool, and I warrant you it won't be long before you will have a practical demonstration. Flirting is a manner of being discreetly indiscreet. To know how to flirt is no mean accomplishment. It is a very delicate science."

"And to love science, too?"

"No, it's rather an art."

"And marriage—what is it?"

"Oh, that is philosophy."

"Indeed—at what age does one attain this philosophy?"

"As late as possible."

"It seems to me that at twenty-eight—"

"Aunt, aunt!" cried Andrew, springing from his chair, "confess that you are concocting some terrible plot. You took as guilty as a conspirator."

Mrs. Harmon smiled a fine smile and enjoyed for a moment the consternation in her nephew's face. Then she answered:

"Yes, you are right. I wish to get you married."

"In heaven's name, what have I done to you?" gasped the young man, with comic seriousness; and as the old lady still smiled, he continued: "See, here, aunt, I should never have suspected you of such a thing. You, a woman of intelligence, a superior woman, descending to the role of matchmaker! It is a terrible shattering of my ideal."

"Come, come, my poor boy, do not be so cast down. The girl is charming, I can assure you."

"Of course, Andrew burst out, 'the girl is always charming. I know her. I can see her now; she may not be exactly pretty, but as you have said, she is charming. She dresses admirably and makes all her own gowns. She stood at the head of her classes in school, and attends lectures now. Moreover, she has taken cooking lessons and is a put-up preserves. She plays the piano, she sings, she paints and she has a tidy fortune in her own right. Bah! No, a thousand times no! I do not want this miracle of perfection. I know a thing or two, aunt, even if I don't look it, and if I marry, I shall marry a woman who suits me. But I know girls—who are all alike and I know what they are and what they are worth. There isn't one who suits me, or can suit me, and I shall remain a bachelor."

"And you go to take tea at Mrs. Laton's?" murmured Mrs. Harmon between her teeth, while a disturbing expression came into her clear-seeing eyes.

"Under the front and even inglorious look Andrew had countenance a little; he could not deny that to matrimony he preferred flirting with Mrs. Laton. He was pulling himself together to reply, or rather, to defend himself, when the street door bell was heard.

"Aunt, eh? Is this your reception day, aunt, do you see, give your friends tea at 5 o'clock?"

"You are impertinent, nephew. At my age a woman does not give 5 o'clock flirtations. It is not even a clock. I am sure it is my little friend Rosamond, the 'charming girl' I spoke of."

"Do you not wish to see her?"

"Never! Or, if you insist, I shall go into this little ante-room and look at her through the crack of the door. That is the only concession I shall make," and the young man stepped quickly into the next room as the opposite door opened to admit the visitor, through the slit Andrew could make out the graceful silhouette of a young girl.

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